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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 COLOMBO 001601

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TAGS: PREL PTER PHUM PREF MOPS CE

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: MUSLIM LEADER HAKEEM SEEKS SEPARATE
POLITICAL REPRESENTATION FOR MUSLIMS IN PEACE PROCESS

REF: COLOMBO 1531

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Classified By: Ambassador Robert O. Blake for reasons 1.4(b,d).

¶1. (C) Summary. The Ambassador called upon moderate Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) leader Rauf Hakeem on September 28. Formed in 1981 and registered as a political party in 1989, the SLMC is the largest party representing the Muslim electorate in Sri Lanka. A key opposition leader, Hakeem told the Ambassador that his party maintains pragmatic relationships with President Rajapaksa's government, the leading opposition United National Party (UNP), and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), and seeks a political solution to Muslim grievances within the greater peace process. The Ambassador stressed to Hakeem the SLMC's potential to encourage the parties to address human rights concerns and resume the path to a peaceful political settlement. End Summary.

Separate Muslim Representation

¶2. (C) During the Ambassador's September 28 courtesy call, SLMC leader Hakeem told the Ambassador that his party seeks assurances from the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL) and the LTTE that Muslims be principal stakeholders in the peace process and that any settlement must provide Muslims autonomy from the rest of the Tamil population in the North and East. Leading the largest party representing the Muslim electorate in Sri Lanka, Hakeem has the distinction of being the only Muslim political leader to meet with LTTE leader Prabhakaran, following the signing of the Ceasefire Agreement in 2002, and he meets regularly with President Rajapaksa. Despite their linguistic connection, Hakeem contends that Muslims must have a separate political identity from other Tamil speaking people (Hindu and Christian), a concept he said LTTE leader Prabhakaran accepted in their 2002 meeting.

¶3. (C) Hakeem stressed his party's desire to return to the peace process, saying; "We hope the democratic path will bring about a solution to our grievances." The SLMC leader

noted that both sides have agreed to a separate Muslim delegation to future peace talks, but that Muslim political leaders continue to feel sidelined. He said, "The GSL can't just put a Muslim member in their delegation. The GSL on its own can't advocate our cause. We require a tripartite discussion."

Threat of Radicalization

¶4. (C) Hakeem told the Ambassador, "Muslims are fertile ground for radicalization anywhere," and expressed concern that the eastern region, particularly surrounding the predominantly-Muslim Southeastern University in Olivil, "could become a breeding ground for radicalization" if the political system does not address Muslim grievances. He did not think outside countries or influences were playing any role in the increased threat of radicalization. Rather, the risk would rise if the grievances of the Muslim community were not addressed politically. However, speaking confidentially, Hakeem (PROTECT) alluded to the regional

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rivalry between India and Pakistan potentially turning the North and East into a "battle ground of cloak and dagger games, espionage and counter-espionage."

Pottuvil Killings

¶5. (C) Hakeem expressed concern that the press had misquoted him following the September 17 murders of ten Muslim construction workers in the village of Pottuvil, several kilometers north of the USAID-funded Arugam Bay Bridge (reftel). The independent press alleged that Hakeem had blamed the Security Task Force (STF) for the murders while the GSL blamed the LTTE. Hakeem said: "We have a neutral

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position on the killings, but we want a full investigation. The STF had been handling people badly and the people felt absolute disgust for them. In general, I have full confidence in the STF. One STF bodyguard gave his life protecting me. Let us investigate these murders, clear the STF and GSL, and repair the relationship" between the Muslim community and police forces in the East. He added that Muslim civilians, displaced since military engagement began between security forces and the LTTE in July, feel coerced by the GSL to return to their homes in Muttur and surrounding areas.

¶6. (C) Noting that Hakeem had called for an international investigation, the Ambassador explained current efforts to develop a credible commission with the international monitors that would investigate major recent human rights incidents and make recommendations regarding not only appropriate actions but also how to strengthen Sri Lanka's indigenous human rights institutions. Hakeem agreed this was a sensible approach.

Peace Prospects

¶7. (C) The Ambassador stressed to Hakeem that moderate leaders such as himself have a key role to play in encouraging the parties to return to fruitful peace talks. Hakeem said he believed an SLFP-UNP consensus would be critical to move the peace process forward, and that President Rajapaksa has the credibility among the southern nationalist parties to market such a consensus. "They trust him, they'll bite," he said of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) and the Buddhist monk-led Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU, "but he must do it soon." Hakeem added that he was "not entirely optimistic" about the possibility of an SLFP-UNP consensus.

Comment

18. (C) Comment. Rauf Hakeem struck us as a thoughtful member of the opposition who may be able to provide moderation and stability to the parties through his cordial relationship with the GSL and the LTTE. The SLMC will also be a useful ally in promoting our human rights message to the government.

End Comment.

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